

Abu al-Hasan Is Getting Married

SCHEHEREZADE:

But in our heads, my lord, we do contain all the images of the universe—

SHAHRYAR:

Impossible!

[He contemptuously mutters an item from the lists—the most absurd.]

So, go on. What is your next tale? I hope it is more reasonable, or you shall soon lose your own wonderful bag.

[He points at her throat with his knife.]

SCHEHEREZADE:

Harun al-Rashid said,

SCHEHEREZADE AND HARUN AL-RASHID:

That is possibly the single most absurd story I have ever heard!

HARUN AL-RASHID:

I pardon you, Greengrocer!

SCHEHEREZADE:

With this, the clarinetist came forward, kissed the ground, and said,

SCHEHEREZADE AND CLARINETIST:

O Prince of Time! I have a story even more absurd—if you will hear it.

HARUN AL-RASHID:

It is permitted.

[*The finger cymbals ring.*]

CLARINETIST:

Perhaps you have heard, Harun al-Rashid, of the noble but most unfortunate Abu al-Hasan and his historic indiscretion at his own wedding?

HARUN AL-RASHID:

No.

[*Wedding music begins.*]

CLARINETIST:

Know then, my lord, that there was once a great merchant, Abu al-Hasan, a man of exquisite refinement, of perfect and complete manners, who, in his middle years, decided it was time to take a wife. And so—

[*A WOMAN sings the following as the MEN perform a little dance, led by ABU AL-HASAN, who is very vain and serious. The BRIDE is brought in by the WOMEN.*]

WOMAN [*singing*]:

Rise up and sing the season, Abu al-Hasan is getting married.
A rich merchant, and a gentleman, see how perfectly his form is carried.

So dignified and somber, with elegance beyond comparing;
His steps could teach a ship to sail, his glances warm the very air.

[*All the WOMEN join in, singing.*]

And, as they say, a glad wife is like a golden almanac
Whose rose-scented leaves are delicately pointing back

[The WOMAN sings alone.]

To the wedding season, where the breeze of benediction carries;
So rise up, sing the season, Abu al-Hasan is getting married.

[Music continues.]

CLARINETIST:

The lovely young wife took her seventh and last tour of the room, Abu al-Hasan came forward with a slow and dignified step into the chamber, and to prove that he was a man of gravity and good manners he went to receive the wishes of the old women. But at that moment *[music ends]*, with a belly full of heavy meat and drink, he did something that he did not mean to do, may Allah preserve us all from doing the same!

[The CLARINETIST bends over behind the bowing ABU AL-HASAN and produces a large fart noise. When he runs out of breath, he is followed by at least two more performers doing the same. In the middle of this, the WOMEN shake their jewelry to try to cover the noise and say the following lines.]

WOMEN:

I think it's just—just marvelous how—just how—just how marvelous all this—all this wedding—is.

[They fall silent. The fart continues. Finally, it ends. Long pause.]

ABU AL-HASAN:

Excuse me.

[He tiptoes away; with each step comes a little fart. The WOMEN strike up percussive instruments and begin the following chant. The various travels of ABU AL-HASAN are illustrated by the company of MEN.]

WOMEN:

Oh what an enormous fart!
Shouldn't have eaten those chickpeas.

Al-Hasan you better fly far
Shouldn't have eaten those chickpeas.

Fly on out of here, al-Hasan,
Get out of town as fast as you can,

Get on a horse while you can,
Shouldn't have eaten those chickpeas.

Ride to the coast, al-Hasan.
Oh what an enormous fart.

Dive in the sea as best you can.
Oh what an enormous fart!

How could you be so indiscreet?
Shouldn't have eaten those chickpeas.

Pistachio nuts and almond cream—
Now you've got to swim to sea.

Get on a boat and row row row;
Shouldn't have eaten those chickpeas.

Sail as far as the Malabar Coast.
Shouldn't have eaten those chickpeas.

Load up a camel, join a train;
Go through the desert with a caravan.

Oh what an enormous fart!
How will you ever live it down?

Go over mountains, find a town,
And live there for ten years.

[The WOMEN now become ABU AL-HASAN'S FRIENDS in India. One of them plays a little tune on a zither.]

FRIEND OF ABU AL-HASAN:
Al-Hasan, why do you look so sad?

ABU AL-HASAN:
I have lived here, in India, for ten years. I've been happy, prospered.
But I long for my native homeland. For, as the poet says,

ABU AL-HASAN AND FRIENDS:
Ah, the Ganges
Ah, the Ganges
Silver river men put first;
How can an Egyptian sate his native Egyptian thirst
Save in the smile of the mild Nile?
Save in the smile of the mild Nile?

ABU AL-HASAN:

I can resist the solicitations of my soul no longer. I must return home!

CLARINETIST:

With that, the noble Abu al-Hasan packed his bags and traveled home, over treacherous mountains filled with lions, snakes, and ghouls. Until at last he reached a hill that overlooked his native land. His heart swelled at the sight.

ABU AL-HASAN:

Ah, how beautiful is my native land! No doubt I am assumed dead and long forgotten. I shall travel the streets in disguise, lest my poor old father see me unexpectedly and the shock prove too much for him.

[He passes by a MOTHER and her CHILDREN.]

FIRST CHILD:

Mother, what day was I born?

MOTHER:

Why, you were born on the twelfth day of Ramadan.

SECOND CHILD:

And what day was I born?

MOTHER:

Why, you were born two weeks after the great sandstorm.

THIRD CHILD:

And, Mother, what day was I born?

MOTHER:

Why, you were born in the year, and on the day, that Abu al-Hasan let his fart.

ABU AL-HASAN:

My fart has become a date on the calendar? It shall live as long as there are palm trees!

CLARINETIST:

With that he turned and fled, and he did not cease his flight until he was back in India, where he lived in the bitterness of exile until his death.

CHORUS:

Allah pity him!

[The triangle is struck. SHAHRYAR, SCHEHEREZADE, and DUNYAZADE come into center stage rolling with laughter. They imitate the fart noise, by themselves and on each other. The WAZIR comes forward with the shroud, hears the laughter, and departs, puzzled. Then they stop. SHAHRYAR raises his knife to SCHEHEREZADE, but then he kisses her. While they kiss, SCHEHEREZADE takes the knife from him and passes it to DUNYAZADE, who then waves the audience away and covers her eyes.]

DUNYAZADE *[whispering]*:

Intermission. Intermission.

